

BILDUNG AND EDUCATIONAL LANGUAGE: TALKING OF ‘THE SELF’ IN ANGLO-AMERICAN EDUCATION

Norm Friesen (nfriesen@tru.ca); October 22, 2012

To speak of education as ‘a process of living and not [as] a preparation for future living’ (Dewey 1897: 7) has rather different implications for theory and practice than conceiving of it as a form of ‘human control’ to be exercised through ‘fundamental laws of change’ (Thorndike 1912: 95, 97).

Over the past century or more, the language associated with education and pedagogy has changed considerably. I sketch out an overview of these changes, focusing on the field of educational psychology, and beginning with the work of Dewey on the one hand, and Behaviourism on the other. I include the vocabulary of the ‘Learning Sciences’ which sees itself as being centrally informed by the neurosciences.

I focus on the notion of ‘the self’ in educational psychology. The term *Bildung* is central to this psychology, particularly as it is articulated in Dewey’s early textbook titled simply “psychology.” *Bildung* has been variously translated as edification, formation or growth, and it refers on the one hand to the ‘developmental formation of an individual’s unique potential through participation in the social practices and institutions of culture’ (Good & Garrison 2007: 44). On the other hand, it also includes the “cultivation of inner life,” the development of subjectivity, as a kind of quality of selfhood, and as a manifestation of its freedom.

In writing influenced by theories of *Bildung*, the self is discussed in terms of self-consciousness and autonomous activity in a manner that incorporated emotion, intellect, subjectivity and identity. I examine how these possibilities of speaking of the self were first of all extinguished by behaviourism from formal and theoretically-based discourses in the educational mainstream. And how a notion of the self was only gradually re-introduced in relatively recent developments in cognitive psychology. I argue that the vocabulary provided by this and related paradigms is inadequate as a resource for educational theorizing and practice.

Introduction

Hegel’s dialectical theory of the formation or *Bildung* of the self through processes of contradiction and reconciliation, alienation and activity forms a general framework that structures Dewey’s early theorizing: ‘the most significant Hegelian deposit in Dewey’s... thought,’ as Good concludes in his book-length study, ‘is the *Bildung* model of philosophy’ (2006: xx). Also important is the influence of German early childhood theorist Friedrich Fröbel.

Self and its formation in Hegel and Hegelianism above all concerns the consciousness of the self, a quality that does not simply refer to mere sensory cognizance, but to a capacity for attentiveness, feeling and volition as shaped by experience and purpose. Hegel conceives of the self as undergoing constant development, gradually maturing via a transition from an immediate consciousness or sensory awareness to a more mediated *self*-consciousness through engagement with the world and with others. The self in this sense can be said to be manifest as a *development occurring through activity*.

Dewey also names as the fundamental characteristic of the self the simple ‘fact of consciousness,’ the reality that it is aware of itself and the world around it:

‘The individual is not born a realized self,’ he says, ‘but his psychical existence is the process of realization’ (157). It is in its active consciousness, through its feeling and volition, that the self’s essence, its selfhood, is realized. But for Dewey as for Mead and Hegel, this is not a solitary activity. It occurs in and through the self’s engagement with others:

The self which is the object of intuition is not an object existing ready made, and needing only to have consciousness turned to it, as towards other objects, to be known like them as a separate object... The self is [instead] a connecting, relating activity, and hence is a real unity, one which unites into a whole all the various elements and members of our knowledge. (Dewey 1887: 210)

A key dimension of this activity for Dewey is what he refers to as “self activity,” referring to the self’s relation with itself, and its activity in realizing its selfhood. Writing approvingly of ‘Fröbel’s Educational Principles’ in *School and Society* (1907), Dewey describes self-activity in more concrete terms as nothing less than ‘the primary root of all educative activity:’

the instinctive, impulsive attitudes and activities of the child ... [the] numberless spontaneous activities of children, plays, games, mimic efforts, even the apparently meaningless motions of infants... are the foundation-stones of educational method. (112)

some 15 years later in the pages of *Democracy and Education* (1916) Dewey refers to self-activity by using the term ‘interest,’ saying that the latter is nothing less than constitutive of the self in its active formation.

the self is not something ready-made, but something in continuous formation through choice of action... In fact, self and interest are two names for the same fact; the kind and amount of interest actively taken in a thing reveals and measures the quality of selfhood which exists. (34)

The self is an ever-developing and purposeful activity that is in constant and active engagement with the world and its objects. And this action, significantly, is inseparable from the self’s interest and its very identity.

At the same time as Dewey writing these words, Edward Thorndike is laying out a causal scientific vocabulary that set the terms for research to this day, and that banishes or at least minimizes the significance of the “self.” The self is rendered an ephiphenomenal illusion, or a prefix indicating a kind of functional reflexivity. Beginning with Thorndike, educational phenomena that can be discussed in everyday language like character, interest, or skill can be accounted for using the rather different terminology of behavioural responses, situations, and the connections between them. The everyday language of personal intention, volition and agency

can, in principle, be eliminated for the purposes of explanation. Apparently taking aim at Dewey's own language of consciousness and volitional action, Thorndike puts this as follows:

In the case of the so-called action-consciousness the neglect of the connections becomes preposterous. The adventitious scraps of consciousness called 'willing' which may intervene between a situation productive of a given act and the act itself are hopelessly uninformative in comparison with the bonds of instinct and habit which cause the situation to produce the act. (1911: 18)

Thorndike leaves little doubt that a self constituted through factors such as will, activity and consciousness is superfluous for scientific studies of behaviour and learning. These constituents are marginalized as extrinsic, epiphenomenal and 'hopelessly uninformative' when compared to the causal connections of instinct and habit.

1. MANUFACTURE means to make or build. Chair factories manufacture chairs. Copy the word here: _ _ _ _ _
2. Part of the word is like part of the word FACTORY. Both parts come from an old word meaning make or build. M A N U _ _ _ _ U R E
3. Part of the word is like part of the word MANUAL. Both parts come from an old word for hand. Many things are made by hand. _ _ _ _ _ F A C T U R E
4. The same letter goes in both spaces. M _ _ N U F _ _ C T U R E
5. The same letter goes in both spaces. M A N _ _ F A C T _ _ R E
6. Chair factories _ _ _ _ _ chairs. (Skinner 1958: 973)

The self reappears in a with some consistency in the context of the moderation of what Albert Bandura called in 1992 an 'austere cognitivism.' This early cognitivism, as Bandura explains 'neglected self-regulatory processes that govern human development and adaption.' The multiple 'self processes' or 'self-referent phenomena' that Bandura wishes to introduce include most prominently 'self-regulation,' 'self-efficacy' and 'self-concept.' Bandura explains these dimensions of the self as follows:

Effective intellectual functioning requires much more than simply understanding the factual knowledge and reasoning operations for given activities.... Self influences affect the selection and construction of environments. The impact of most environmental influences on human motivation, affect, and action is heavily mediated through self processes. They give meaning and valence to external events. Self influences thus operate as important proximal determinants at the very heart of causal processes. (1992: 117-118)

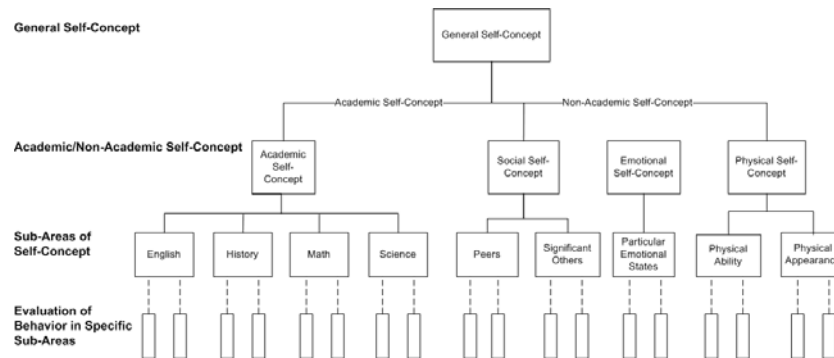


Figure 1: Self-concept as a hierarchical organization of evaluations of behaviour in various sub-areas and situations (diagram developed based on illustration in Bandura: 1993).

Self-efficacy refers to ‘people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance.’ Bandura underscores the importance of self-efficacy in beginning to articulate at an understanding of personal agency:

People make causal contributions to their own functioning through mechanisms of personal agency. Among the mechanisms of agency, none is more central or pervasive than people's beliefs about their capabilities to exercise control over their own level of functioning and over events that affect their lives. (118)

The psychologically-significant ‘self-process’ that appears by far the most frequently in the literature of the learning sciences is self-explanation. Here is how the term was introduced back in 1989:

We find that ‘Good’ students learn with understanding: They generate many explanations ...[and] these self-explanations are guided by accurate monitoring of their own understanding and misunderstanding. Such learning results in example-independent knowledge and in a better understanding. (Chi et al 1989: 145)

Chi and her co-authors provide an example of a student engaged in self explanation and self monitoring, as evidenced through prompts to for subjects to talk aloud, or to articulate their thoughts as they are thinking. The table, below, is presented as a record of the thoughts of a ‘good’ student subject, as well as his or her reading aloud from a textbook, and the prompts of the experimenter. The right column identifies the content of each of these, and the left identifies the function of each line, grouping those indicative of self-functions into a more general unit of analysis which they refer to as ‘idea statements’ (numbered I-III):

| Idea Statements | Protocol lines |
|-------------------|---|
| Read line 6: | <i>Fa, Fb, and Fe are all the forces acting on the body.</i> (pause) |
| I. Monitoring: | 1) Okay. |
| Read line 7. | <i>Since the ...</i> (pause) |
| Experimenter: | (Okay. what are you thinking about?) |
| II. Monitoring: | 2) I'm trying to think where Forces Fb and Fa 3) are going to get the thing. |
| III. Explanation: | 4) They'd just be the force, the rest mass of 5) the thing holding it up would be the force. 6) It could, well, actually it'd be the force of weight. |

Table 1: Self-explanation study protocol from Chi et al 1989, p. 159.

In this and other formulations concerning the self and self-reflexive processes, the particular psychological entity of the self is constructed in a way that is not too different from Skinner's definition of the self as the conventional representation of 'a functionally unified system of responses.' The self is a functional system that is capable, in some instances, of exercising agency by applying its own functions (e.g., monitoring or explanation) reflexively to itself or its performance.

But what kind of self is this, then? Jack Martin, referring to Charles Taylor characterizes this self as a "punctual self," someone who simply engages in processes that are his or her own best interests of the moment.

Cut off from wider, historical and contemporary traditions of life with others, and unencumbered by political and ethical considerations that attend communal living... [this punctual] self simply does what it wills itself to do in its own best interests of the moment. (2004: 200)

Going further, Martin concludes: 'there is nothing in [this] self that would distinguish between Mother Theresa and Tony Soprano, so long as it can be assumed that both have a plan and feel reasonably good about themselves.' A good student, as student with appropriate self-efficacy is in fact one that feels reasonably good about him or herself, and who engages effectively in processing and articulation that is required at the moment.

To counteract this, I do not propose an uncritical return to the vocabulary of the early Dewey or of idealist dialectics. But I advocate that the task of integrating a more meaningful conception of self into theoretically-grounded educational vocabularies is more a process of retrieval than of invention. This paper concludes by considering what might be recuperated from *Bildung* and

specifically self-activity, and I refer to Mollenhauer's *Forgotten Connections*, a book forthcoming in translation from Routledge this year.

One of the lengthier chapters in Mollenhauer's text is titled 'Self-Activity: Children's own plans and projects,' and in it, Mollenhauer almost seems to pick up from where Dewey left off in developing the concept:

In a pedagogical context, self-activity does not simply refer to an activity of one form or another; nor is it a natural biological phenomenon or some kind of random action; for self-activity is an activity that brings into play *potential powers* that are activated not by 'spontaneous generation' but rather by 'encouragement' via *social interaction*. Hence in a pedagogic context, the teacher or parent's responsibility is to nurture and call forth these potential powers... The skills and abilities thus acquired or 'appropriated' then become the drivers of *personalization*, i.e. the productive forces that pave the way for the child to be brought up. (1983: 141)

As the term suggests, self-activity is activity that arises from within the self; but it is not entirely spontaneous, random or even individual. Instead, as Mollenhauer sees it, it is called forth in engagement or relation with another, generally an adult.

He describes, for example, a mother assisting her child to walk while simultaneously appearing to be holding the child back. He also describes a shy eight-year-old developmentally-challenged child being taught mathematics while at the same time learning to become more self-assertive. This last example may provide a helpful contrast with the behaviourist and cognitivist protocols cited above. In this exchange, the child, Didier, is being tutored briefly by his teacher:¹

- 'Teacher: How many fingers do you have?
- Didier: Just a sec. Hmmm... one, two three four. Four.
- And how many do I have?
- (Didier counts) Five
- Does everyone have the same number of fingers?
- Yup.
- So how many fingers does Charles have?
- Five.
- And you?
- I just told you.
- But how many was that?
- Oh come on, four!
- But I have five, right?
- Yeah, but I've still got fewer.'

The teacher's interpretation of this rather odd interchange is as follows: 'Didier cannot abstract from what is [emotionally] concrete, and this is what gets in the way of his activity or efforts.' Thus, Didier's feelings of inadequacy and the cognitive tasks before him are seen to be

competing for validity, preventing him from dealing with his own situation (i.e. the number of fingers on his hand) on simply intellectual, mathematical terms. The teacher is gently and patiently challenging Didier to see this contradiction and to move towards the possibilities offered by the exercise of abstraction. Eventually, this teacher and Didier's personal success as (and also his own, pedagogical accomplishment) as follows:

Didier has since made some progress – in fact he's made quite a bit of progress. He's completely different from the way he was in September. He's much less scattered and has totally stopped being such a tame and unadventurous kid. He's become lively and even a bit mischievous, and has learned how to stand up for himself.

This description is conspicuously different from the characterizations of 'good' and 'poor' students associated with self-explanation or the contingencies of reinforcement that would be combined in Skinner's programmed instruction. Didier's teacher makes no reference to his student's progress in terms of Didier's efficiency in solving math problems, and in processing the data putatively involved in such work in a more verbose or sustained manner. Instead, this progress is measured in terms of ethical and social dimensions, and in the 'calling forth' of potentiality in a general sense –in terms that are actually opposed to the stereotype of a 'good' student. These are characteristics that are forcefully expressive of self-activity, understood in a manner that is largely congruent with Dewey's descriptions, above. The teacher is pleased that Didier now views and pursues his own interests and activities as being of equal importance and value as those of others. Although this also makes Didier a less compliant boy from a narrow behavioural perspective, it expresses the development of his self or selfhood, and in a way more readily visible in relational and ethical terms than in purely cognitive, academic ones.

References:

Bandura, A. (1993) 'Perceived Self-Efficacy in Cognitive Development and Functioning', *Educational Psychologist*, 28:117-148.

Chi, M. T. H., Bassok, M., Lewis, M., Reimann, P., & Glasser, R. (1989) 'Self-explanations: How students study and use examples in learning to solve problems', *Cognitive Science*, 13: 145–182.

Chi, M.T.H. (2000) 'Self-explaining expository texts: The dual processes of generating inferences and repairing mental models', in R. Glaser, R. (ed.) *Advances in Instructional Psychology*, Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, pp. 161-238.

Dewey, J. (1887) *Psychology*, New York: Harper

Dewey, J. (January 1897) My 'Pedagogic Creed', *School Journal*, 54: 77-80.

Dewey, J. (1907) *School and Society*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Dewey, J. (1916), *Democracy and education: an introduction to the philosophy of education* New York: Macmillan.

Good, J. A. & Garrison, J. (2007) 'Traces of Hegelian Bildung in Dewey's philosophy', in P. Fairfield (ed.) *John Dewey and Continental Philosophy*. Carbondale: SIU Press.

Good, J. A. (2006) *A Search for unity in diversity: The 'Permanent Hegelian Deposit' in the philosophy of John Dewey* Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Martin, J. (2004) 'The educational inadequacy of conceptions of self in educational psychology', *Interchange* 35: 185-208.

Mollenhauer, K. (1983/2013) *Forgotten Connections: On Culture and Upbringing*. London: Routledge.

Thorndike, E.L. (1910) 'The contribution of psychology to education', *The Journal of Educational Psychology* 1: 5-12.

Thorndike, E.L. (1911) *Animal intelligence*, New York: Macmillan.

Thorndike, E.L. (1912) *Education: A first book*, New York: MacMillan.

Van Lehn, K. Jones R.M. & Chi, M.T.H. (1992) 'A Model of the self-explanation effect', *The Journal of the Learning Sciences* 2: 1-59.

ⁱ Mollenhauer describes this in the simplest terms as: 'A parent or educator who encourages a child to achieve self-activity need not come across as a highly active person themselves, or engage in pursuits that aim to achieve a particular effect. All the parent/educator need do is be reasonably attentive to the difference between the possible and the real. Hence the cardinal virtues in such settings are attentiveness, being a good listener, and patient observation.'